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Being from the Flathead Reservation, I understand what a hot, sunny day means. When clouds disperse, the sun glazes down on a shiny, orange hoop—that's when the Rez Kids come out. Three things make a Rez Kid: witty jokes, a nasty vocabulary, and a love for basketball. Life for the Rez Kid has always depended on the weather. Even in the old days, activities could only be played as much as the weather allowed, or as much as a man could stand. Everything was, and still is, for survival. Sure, winters were bad back then: food was scarce, and keeping warm was a full-time job. But the weight of modernity pressurizes and transforms cultures. Indians know that better than anyone. At some point there was a break in the timeline. The start of a season was no longer dictated by weather, and warriors were no longer solely characterized by descriptions of force and destruction. Today, there are two kinds of warriors known to my reservation: the kind in the cold who track down an eight-by-eight bull elk, swiftly taking the giant animal's life, gutting and cleaning the animal's insides and ingesting the heart as appreciation to Creator for such a wonderful gift; and there's the kind of warrior that emerges from the warmth, the one that helps define a culture with an orange ball and a passion—the one who plays basketball.

I have lived off the reservation for two years. There's an old saying that goes, "You can take the kid off the Rez, but you can't take the Rez out the kid." This is odd because every year I was away, my ability to bullshit weakened, the punch of my jokes softened, and my skills as a basketball player—well, they aren't good enough. Don't get me wrong, I was never the greatest player. I'm what some would call an average player amongst the reservation legends that lace up their kicks one shattered dream at a time. I worked my ass off to become average too, always dribbling in the shadow of more talented and athletic kids, usually Indian. I have no remorse; it was an honor to be a part of such a long and proud tradition, like a Flag Song at graduation or a Salish prayer at a funeral.

The drive from my house in Missoula to my hometown on the reservation takes approximately twenty-seven minutes when driving at a minimum of six miles over the speed limit. As each minute passes, familiarity settles in the pit of my stomach like each bite of a home-cooked meal. When I enter the valley, mountains engulf and encapsulate the remnants of a culture with an endless history. Most of the faces I see have roots that date back to traditional times, when the Salish language was a necessity and horses were currency. Tragedy haunts the dark faces of some people who are naïve about values and locked in a consistent cycle of poverty. From early broken promises to a slower, dissolving sense of identity, it's amazing and heartbreaking to know there are still memories that can be retraced and to know that we haven't become memories ourselves. These faces are wounded and stiff, but functional, like rehab after surgery. It didn't start this way but that's how it is, and for me, that's how it always was.

The town itself is filled with uniform boxes of tribal housing and a public school. I make sure not to blink and miss it while I ease off of the highway that cuts straight down the middle of everything. Once I pull off, I'll unquestionably meet up with one of my old friends from high school at the only grocery store in town—happens every time. He'll say something like, "Hey cousin, got five bucks gas? I'll get yuh back next per cap!" He'll either be droopy eyed or wired, a tribal employee or a Salish-Kootenai College student. Four hundred dollars of per-capita, paid out three times a year from his tribe will never be enough to pay back his debts. And he'll never be my actual cousin.

I'll reply with something along the lines of, "Jeez, robbin' me like a Kootenai!" and he'll laugh until he starts coughing, and I'll laugh halfheartedly because of the mocked Kootenai blood flowing in my veins. I'll give him the five bucks that may or may not be used for gas, and I'll never see it again nor expect it back, not even after per cap. As I leave the store I'll involuntarily glance up at Dancing Boy—a peculiar formation filled in with snow high in the mountains that extraordinarily resembles a native in full regalia, his knees are lifted and his back is arched, as he dances and blesses my little hometown eight months out of the year. That's when I know the transformation is complete. That's when I know I'm home.

One day—it had to be a weekday because all Tribal funded facilities are closed on weekends for some reason; "The time when you need those fuckers the most," my grandmother used to say—I walked into the Tribal Community Complex, better known around the valley as "The Center," fully clothed in alternative-traditional Native regalia: Jordan

shirts, Jordan shorts, and Jordan shoes. Cold wind pierced my arms and legs. Icy sidewalks tested my balance. It was like a competition against nature just to get inside the building, but once inside, nothing could hurt me. It was the public haven. To heat the Center had to cost a fortune, which is a word I use loosely and metaphorically because I don't think that building has been heated since it was nothing more than a camp of teepees with smoke leaking out the top. I shivered my way down the hallway until I reached the gymnasium. The old floor looked seasoned but clean. There was no one inside the gym except for large portraits of Native legends that circled the walls around me. They weren't all basketball legends. Some were fluent Salish speakers, boxers, or well-respected elders. My great grandma, Ann Mary Lefthand, was placed right behind the backboard of the basketball hoop. She was an avid basketball fan, I hear, so her placement was appropriate. When I shot the ball or dribbled around my back and through my legs, her eyes seemed to follow me, and her fixed, wrinkled smile was painted so precisely, I couldn't help but feel her appreciation as I watched the ball swish freshly through the net. I wonder if that's the effect my great grandma has on everyone who has played there. It was like shooting that ball brought her back to life, even if for a moment, and it was beautiful.

When it's cold out, weekends are tough without The Center because that's when Rez Kids thrive on cheap liquor, weed, and recklessness. But on warmer days, as in most towns, a new glow presents itself and is projected from the faces of everyone. More waves are given on the streets, sobriety stretches out the day, conversations last a little longer, and best of all, the faint sound of a basketball bouncing up and down on the concrete—a different sound than the bounce on a wood floor—steadily replays itself like sweet music.

My freshman year of high school, a group of my friends, both older and younger, took the power of spray paint and the liberty bestowed upon us by the weekend to turn an elementary school's concrete basketball court into the greatness that is the Battlefield. The court reeked of rez, with its eight-foot-high basketball hoop on one side, and a nine-foot hoop on the other. Blue, red, and green spray paints dazzled the entire court, and both backboards were engraved with a word: "East" on the eight-foot rim, and "West" on the nine-foot rim. In the middle, a circle was drawn intersecting each of the four slabs of concrete that made up the court, uniting them like a medicine wheel. Within that circle, separated by the cracks, are the names of four rival Indian schools. I have friends from all of them, and every one of them has laced up their kicks at some point in their lives, tested their skills out at the Battlefield.

I recently drove back to the Battlefield and parked next to the empty church that blessed every game we played out there. The sun had peaked, so I knew the sounds of coarse engines would greet me soon. The parking lot only contained eight spots and filled quickly with clanking cars and scrappy trucks—very distinct Rez rides with very similar characteristics, complete with duct-taped windows and bungee corded hoods. I doubt that all of these cars put together could make one decent, reliable car, but that's okay—Indians are never good with reliable anyway.

"Hol, look at this guy! How you doing, babes?" Harvey greets me with a smile. He was wearing Jordan everything, shoes and socks and shorts. I guess most of the kids were, but none as deserving as Harvey.

"Ayyy, a lot better now that I see you," I replied. A friend later told me that Harvey had been on a drinking binge since quitting the basketball team at SKC, which made sense; his beer gut was starting to show. I wondered then why he seemed so happy.

I was asked to play, and never would I pass up such an opportunity, but as it goes, I was still recovering from a recent knee surgery, and I knew better than to test it out against a bunch of high-flying, scoring-hungry Rez Kids who craved contact. There was never a casual game at the Battlefield. When you play there, you play not only to win but to prove something—to yourself, your teammates willing to battle around you, and to the people who support everything you represent. It's such a pleasure to witness, like colorful murals inside a grand church. I sat it out as they ran fives.

The first possession started out slow, as it usually does. Harvey dribbled the ball down the court towards the "East" eight-foot backboard, giving him the advantage on top of his already-natural advantage as a great ball player. He eloquently dribbled the ball six or seven times between his legs, behind the back, crossed over with no need for a screen and scored a lay-up with ease and artistry. That's when the real game began. The ball was quickly thrown in from under the basket, igniting a fast break that seemed endless until the game's final shot.

The ball was passed to Dom, my closest friend on the court. He was lighter than most Natives, really light. I think he barely made the cut for blood quantum at Enrollment Services. But man, there was never any question about his basketball skills. In fact, that's probably how Enrollment Services found out he had enough blood to be a tribal member. They just gave him a ball, and each shot he could make earned him a percentage point. If that were the case, there would be no doubt they wanted him on the team. He was only five feet, nine inches tall, but being the most athletic and a gifted ball handler, he got down the court easily

for a powerful two-handed slam dunk on the "West" nine-foot hoop. Dom attended college with me for a semester before returning to the Rez to join a heavy machinery program at SKC. He says he plans to one day earn a certificate in diesel mechanics and run his family-owned mechanic shop in our home town. He wants to fix it up and re-open one day to fix all these Rez rides and Kootenai cruisers in our town. The "Mechanic Messiah" he calls himself. Who would've thought he'd be Native?

The ball continued to fly from one end of the court to the other—lay-up after lay-up, slam after slam, and curse word after curse word. Nothing ever stood still. The ball was thrown to Trae, Harvey's best friend, once upon a time. Trae, with the silkiest of jump shots, rose from the half-court line and placed the ball perfectly in the cylinder. The ball tickled each twine as it dropped through the net. What a shot! As he landed on his favored right leg, a sly smile overcame his competitive stoicism. Trae had surgery like mine a couple months prior, and Dom tells me he got pretty hard into pills, said he struggled without basketball because being a college dropout and never having a job in his life, basketball truly was everything to him. He always drank and talked about trying meth on a few separate occasions, but man, he was one hell of a ball player.

The score was tied.

Harvey had managed to keep his lackluster team in the game. He didn't like to lose. So when he stepped up the defense at the end, I thought for sure the game was his. But Little Will, a freshman in high school and the son of a local cop dribbled up. He's left-handed, and as a freshman, the future of high school basketball for this town.

I remember watching Will years earlier at the Center working on his craft, as though he realized at a young age that one day he would follow the footsteps of the skilled warriors before him. And he would be ready for it. Basketball was sacred to him because it was sacred to his family. They haven't missed a high school basketball game in years. He wanted to make them proud. He wanted to make his people proud.

Will dribbled down, only needing one point to win. Shorter than everyone else, he slipped past Harvey with a simple hard dribble to the left. Harvey, slower than Will in his prime, watched him effortlessly zoom by—just like Harvey used to. From there, Little Will rose to the occasion and swished the same incredible shot Trae had made earlier from half-court, only this time it was followed by multiple F-words from the opposing team. Will had won. It was a story I've seen many times before, but with alternate endings, and I never knew exactly what those endings meant for the other teams.

That was the only game I watched that day, and the only game that was played. Everyone said their goodbyes and made plans for the next big game, to be held at The Center, probably, but who knows? I hung out with Dom for a little while, talked about arbitrary basketball facts and summer plans—nothing too heavy after a hard-fought game. The others probably headed back to their boxes. Harvey and Trae went out drinking, or to do something else they were good at. Will went home to tell his dad what happened, as I would have, and prepared for his upcoming school week. Dom also had class the next day, like I did, so I didn't stay long.

When driving back to Missoula, I usually cradle under the speed limit for some time; there's never any rush to leave. The trip is often lonely, and leaves me with some time to think. And on that particular day, it amazed me even more than usual to think how such different people can be brought together on the basketball court. That day, the identities of Harvey, Trae, Dom, and Will—and everyone else that played there—no longer mattered. It may not have been the proudest day for Indians; it's not like you'll see the game brought up at a Tribal Council meeting or anything, but at that singular point in time, just for an instant, they were all artists painting on the same canvas, and what they were able to create was beautiful. In one moment they were nothing and everything, failures and successes. Traditional. Warriors. •